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Giving voice to the silent crises.

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When entire communities are rendered unheard, they become invisible to policymakers and the world.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND AWARENESS

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Giving voice to the silent crises. | 2025

01

MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

By Dr. Najaf Ali

Assistant Professor, GC University Lahore

Giving voice to the unheard is not charity. It is the first and most essential step toward dismantling systems of oppression.

Around the world, billions of people live on the margins of society, their voices systematically silenced by deep-rooted discrimination that operates at every level of human interaction. These are the ethnic, religious, caste-based, and tribal groups ignored by mainstream discourse, not because their stories lack importance, but because the very structures of media, governance, and economy are designed to privilege dominant groups while rendering others invisible. More than 5 billion people live under some form of religious discrimination globally, according to the Pew Research Center, meaning that the majority of the worlds population faces restrictions on how they can worship, assemble, or express their beliefs. At the same time, over 476 million Indigenous peoples representing more than 5,000 distinct cultures remain among the most disadvantaged groups on the planet, with life expectancies up to 20 years lower than non-Indigenous populations in countries like Australia and Canada.

Take caste-based exclusion in South Asia. In India alone, over 200 million Dalits face daily humiliation, violence, and economic boycotts despite constitutional abolition of caste discrimination in 1950. Yet mainstream media in India is dominated by privileged caste groups, with studies showing that 90% of journalists and 85% of newsroom leadership come from upper castes, while Dalits and Adivasis hold less than 5% of media positions. This lack of representation means that when a Dalit woman is paraded naked or a Dalit man is killed for

drawing water from a well, the story is either ignored or framed as a law-and-order issue rather than systemic oppression. In the first half of 2025 alone, human rights organizations documented 113 caste-based atrocities, including murders, gang rapes, and forced manual scavenging, a practice of cleaning human waste with bare hands, which remains almost exclusively a Dalit occupation despite being legally banned since 1993. The economic toll is devastating: Dalits and other marginalized groups face direct discrimination in wage labor markets, earning 30 to 40% less than upper-caste workers for identical jobs, and are overwhelmingly represented among the working poor, those who work full-time yet remain below the poverty line.

Religious minorities face similar erasure. In Myanmar, the militarys systematic campaign against the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group, included mass killings, gang rapes, and the burning of entire villages. The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission concluded that the Myanmar military committed acts of genocide and crimes against humanity, forcing over 750,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, where they now live in the worlds largest refugee camp. Yet global media coverage was slow and uneven, with many outlets using passive language like ethnic cleansing instead of genocide for years. In England and Wales, Muslims make up 45% of all recorded religious hate crime victims, and these incidents increased by 20% in 2025, according to official police data. The victims are disproportionately women wearing hijab or niqab, who report being spat upon, having their headscarves torn off, and being called terrorists in public spaces. Despite this, mainstream British media often portrays Muslims through the narrow lens of extremism or cultural conflict, rarely featuring Muslim voices discussing their everyday lives, aspirations, or contributions to society.

Tribal and Indigenous communities are perhaps the most invisible of all. In Brazils Amazon, illegal gold miners and loggers have invaded Indigenous lands with impunity, murdering tribal leaders like Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips, whose deaths only made international news because one was a British journalist. For every high-profile killing, dozens of others go unreported. The Yanomami people have suffered a 30% increase in malnutrition and malaria rates due to mercury poisoning from illegal mining, yet Brazilian mainstream media rarely covers these health crises unless a celebrity or politician intervenes. In the United States, Native American reservations face some of the highest poverty rates in the country. Over 25% of Native Americans live below the poverty line compared to 11% of whites, and the rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women is ten times the national average. Yet federal databases routinely misclassify or simply lose reports, and media coverage remains sporadic, often focusing on casinos or historical trauma rather than contemporary systemic violence.

The health consequences of being unheard are fatal. In the US, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian populations have lower life expectancies and higher rates of premature death from

preventable diseases. Black patients with diabetes are hospitalized at rates more than 2.5 times higher than white patients, not because diabetes is more common but because they lack access to primary care and routine management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous communities in the US died at twice the rate of white populations, yet public health messaging was rarely translated into their languages or tailored to their cultural contexts. Globally, the World Health Organization estimates that Indigenous peoples have a life expectancy 20 years lower than non-Indigenous populations, with infant mortality rates 60% higher. These disparities are not accidents of geography. They are direct results of healthcare systems that ignore, underfund, or actively discriminate against marginalized communities.

The criminal justice system offers another window into this erasure. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up just 3% of the population but 28% of the adult prison population and 46% of the youth detention population. Indigenous leaders have documented rampant police profiling, excessive use of force, and deaths in custody that rarely lead to prosecutions. A 2025 report found that Aboriginal children are removed from their families at ten times the rate of non-Indigenous children, a crisis that experts describe as stemming from systemic racism that privileges the needs and norms of the dominant population. In the United States, Black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men, and Black women are twice as likely as white women, despite similar rates of drug use across races. The so-called war on drugs has been, in effect, a war on Black and Brown communities, yet mainstream media continues to frame crime in individualistic terms rather than as a product of structural racism.

Why does this matter? Because when entire communities are rendered unheard, they become invisible to policymakers, philanthropists, and the general public. A Dalit womans rape is not a national outrage; it is a local crime statistic. An Indigenous communitys water poisoning is not a public health emergency; it is an environmental footnote. A Muslim familys hate crime is not a societal failure; it is a religious incident buried on page twelve. The exclusion of marginalized communities is not an accident. It is a systemic failure of media, governance, and global attention. Giving voice to the unheard is not charity; it is the first and most essential step toward dismantling the systems of oppression that have silenced them for centuries. Only by listening to those pushed to the margins can we begin to build a truly just and equitable world.

> *Giving voice to the unheard is the first step toward dismantling systems of oppression.*
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02

ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

By Munir Ahmad

Lawyer and Economist

The working poor are not poor because they are lazy. The entire system of capitalism has been rigged to funnel value upward, from the laborer to the shareholder.

It is a strange and terrible irony that the people who do the worlds most essential work are often the ones who cannot afford to live. The person who picks your tomatoes, the person who delivers your dinner, the person who stitches your shirt, the person who cleans your office bathroom after everyone has gone home, these workers are the invisible scaffolding upon which modern life rests, yet they are paid so little that a single broken refrigerator or a week of flu can push them into homelessness. The International Labour Organization estimates that 2 billion workers, or 61% of the global workforce, are employed in the informal economy, meaning they have no written contracts, no paid leave, no health insurance, no retirement savings, and no legal protection if they are fired or injured. In countries like India, the informal sector accounts for over 90% of all employment, yet these workers are rarely mentioned in business headlines or government white papers. They are the street vendors, the domestic helpers, the construction workers, the waste pickers, the rickshaw pullers, and the home-based garment stitchers. The invisible engine of the global economy.

Take gig laborers, the newest and fastest-growing segment of the working poor. Companies like Uber, DoorDash, Amazon Flex, and Deliveroo have built billion-dollar empires on the backs of drivers and delivery workers who are classified as independent contractors rather than employees. This classification allows these corporations to avoid paying minimum wage,

overtime, health benefits, workers compensation, or unemployment insurance. A 2025 study by the University of California found that the average ride-hail driver in the United States earns just $9.21 per hour after accounting for vehicle expenses, well below the federal minimum wage of $7.25 but also far below a living wage in any major city. In the UK, a landmark court case finally forced Uber to classify its drivers as workers entitled to holiday pay, but the ruling took seven years and only came after 25 drivers died of exhaustion-related heart attacks. In India, Swiggy and Zomato delivery partners earn as little as 50 rupees per delivery, with no fuel reimbursement or accident coverage. When a delivery rider is hit by a bus or stabbed by a customer, the companys response is almost always the same: a statement of condolence followed by a small ex-gratia payment and a termination of the contract for inactivity.

Debt-trapped farmers represent perhaps the most heartbreaking face of economic injustice. In India, over 50% of the workforce is employed in agriculture, yet farming contributes only about 15% to the GDP, a massive imbalance that reflects how little value is assigned to those who grow our food. The average Indian farmer earns just 10,000 rupees per month, but their debt burden averages 1.2 lakh rupees, meaning it would take a full year of zero expenses to pay off what they owe. The result is a farmer suicide epidemic: between 1995 and 2024, over 400,000 Indian farmers took their own lives, often after being unable to repay loans for seeds, fertilizers, and water pumps that failed due to drought or crop failure. The state of Maharashtra alone records 15 farmer suicides every single day. And yet, mainstream Indian media devotes far more coverage to Bollywood gossip and cricket scores than to these deaths. When a farmers suicide is reported at all, it is often a three-line news brief in the back pages: Farmer ends life due to debt. No name. No photo. No investigation into which bank extended the loan at 24% interest to a man with no collateral.

In the United States, the story is different but the pattern is the same. Small family farms are being crushed by agricultural conglomerates like Tyson, Cargill, and Monsanto. Between 1980 and 2020, the number of dairy farms in America fell from 300,000 to just 30,000, a 90% decline. Dairy farmers are paid $1.50 per gallon of milk while the retail price is $4.00. The difference is pocketed by processors and supermarkets. In 2025 alone, Wisconsin saw 45 farmer suicides, a number that local newspapers buried on page ten.

The working poor are everywhere but nowhere in public consciousness. In the United Kingdom, 14% of workers live in poverty despite being employed full-time, a figure that rises to 27% for part-time workers. A McDonalds worker in London earns £9.50 per hour, but the living wage in London is calculated at £13.15. That worker can either eat or pay rent, not both. In the United States, 44 million workers earn less than $17 per hour, which is the minimum needed to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment in any major metropolitan area. Walmart, the largest private employer in America, has over 1.5 million employees, and 10% of them report being on food

stamps, meaning American taxpayers are subsidizing Walmarts low wages through public assistance programs. Walmart made $14 billion in profit in 2024, but its workers cannot afford to buy groceries from the store where they work.

In China, the worlds factory floor, workers in electronics and garment factories often work mandatory overtime of 80 hours per week for wages that translate to less than $3 per hour. A 2025 investigation by the South China Morning Post found that 60% of Foxconn workers, the company that assembles iPhones, had symptoms of severe depression and anxiety. Yet when an iPhone is launched, the headlines celebrate its speed and camera quality, not the broken bodies that assembled it.

Why does this economic injustice persist? Because the working poor have no political voice. In most democracies, campaign contributions come from corporations and wealthy individuals, not from gig workers or farmers. Labor unions have been gutted in country after country. US union membership fell from 20% in 1983 to 10% in 2024, while in the UK, it dropped from 50% in 1979 to 23% today. Without collective bargaining power, informal workers and gig laborers are atomized, isolated, and easily exploited. A farmer who cannot pay his loan is told to sell his land. A delivery driver who complains about pay is deactivated from the app. A factory worker who faints from exhaustion is replaced the next day. The media reinforces this invisibility by focusing on stock market indices, GDP growth, and the latest tech IPO, rarely mentioning that growth is unequally distributed. The richest 1% of the worlds population now owns 45% of global wealth, while the bottom 55% owns just 1.5%. Giving voice to the economically unheard means telling the story of a single mother who works two jobs and still sleeps in a shelter, a farmer who waters his fields with tears because the monsoon failed again, a gig worker who keeps driving despite chest pain because skipping a day means skipping a meal. These stories are not anomalies. They are the hidden reality of the global economy.

> ***The working poor are not poor because they are lazy. The system has been rigged to funnel value upward.***
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03

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

By Dr. Gulshan Naaz

Assistant Professor, Punjab University Lahore

The survivors are not asking for pity. They are asking for the world to stop looking away.

Imagine being born into a body that the world refuses to recognize. Imagine working sixteen hours a day in someone elses home, raising their children, scrubbing their floors, and then returning to a shack where your own children have not eaten. Imagine being a mother and a father at the same time, with no one to share the weight of a broken water heater or a childs nightmare. Imagine being beaten by the person who promised to love you, only to have the police ask what you did to provoke him. These are not separate struggles. They are the overlapping realities of gender-based injustice, a web of violence, invisibility, and economic strangulation that affects billions of people across the planet simply because of their gender or sexual identity. The numbers are staggering: globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, most often at the hands of an intimate partner. That is 736 million women. And that number does not include transgender persons, gender-nonconforming individuals, or the countless others whose suffering is never recorded because the systems designed to track such violence do not believe they exist.

Take transgender persons, perhaps the most violently unheard of all. In 2025 alone, at least 350 transgender people were murdered worldwide, according to the Trans Murder Monitoring project, but the real number is certainly much higher because many killings are misclassified or never reported. The vast majority of victims are trans women of color. In Brazil, the country with the highest rate of trans murders for the thirteenth consecutive year, a trans person is killed every three days. The Brazilian media typically reports these deaths with the victims birth

name, sensationalizes their clothing or profession, and buries the story on an inside page. In the United States, 2025 saw a record number of anti-trans bills introduced in state legislatures, over 600 pieces of legislation targeting healthcare, bathroom access, sports participation, and even the mere acknowledgment of trans identity in schools. In Pakistan, the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act of 2018 was a landmark law, but implementation has been a failure. A 2025 report found that 62% of trans Pakistanis have been denied medical care, 78% have faced eviction, and 45% have been sexually assaulted by police officers who are supposed to protect them.

Domestic workers occupy another shadow realm of gender-based injustice. The International Labour Organization estimates that at least 75 million people work as domestic workers worldwide, and 76% of them are women. Their average wage is less than half of the national minimum wage in most countries. In Lebanon, a 2025 investigation revealed that migrant domestic workers from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines are routinely subjected to passport confiscation, 20-hour workdays, food deprivation, and physical beatings. The Kafala sponsorship system ties a workers legal status to a single employer, meaning that running away from an abusive employer makes the worker a criminal. In India, domestic workers are explicitly excluded from the national Minimum Wages Act, a legal loophole that has survived for seventy years because the families who employ domestic workers are often the same families that write legislation and own newspapers. A 2025 study by the Self Employed Womens Association found that 90% of domestic workers in Delhi work 12 to 14 hours daily, earn less than 5,000 rupees per month, have no written contract, and have never taken a single day of paid leave.

Single mothers are perhaps the most invisible members of the working poor, and they are almost always women. In the United States, 23% of children live with a single mother, and 31% of those families live below the poverty line. A single mother working full-time at minimum wage earns $15,080 annually, but the average cost of childcare for one child is $11,000, leaving $4,000 for rent, food, transportation, healthcare, and everything else. The result is impossible choices: pay the rent or buy diapers, fix the car or take the child to the dentist. In the United Kingdom, single mothers are three times more likely to be in poverty than single fathers, and they are the demographic most likely to use food banks. A 2025 study by the London School of Economics analyzed 2,000 British newspaper articles mentioning single mothers and found that 68% used negative or judgmental language, while only 12% mentioned systemic factors like lack of affordable childcare, housing costs, or wage discrimination. In Japan, 54% of single mothers live in relative poverty, compared to 11% of single fathers. The phrase relative poverty sounds clinical, but it means a mother skipping meals so her child can eat, a mother sewing her own clothes because she cannot afford new ones, a mother apologizing to her child for being unable to afford the school trip.

Survivors of patriarchal violence live in a world that blames them for their own suffering. In India, the National Crime Records Bureau reported 31,000 rape cases in 2024, but activists estimate the real number is at least ten times higher because most rapes go unreported. The conviction rate for rape in India is just 27%, and the average sentence for convicted rapists is less than three years. When a young woman is gang-raped and set on fire in Uttar Pradesh, the police chief says she should not have been out after dark. When an Afghan woman reports being beaten by her husband, the judge asks for male witnesses, but a woman cannot leave the house without a male guardian, creating a perfect legal trap. The World Health Organization estimates that 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation, a practice that is defended as tradition in 30 countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The cutting is often done without anesthesia, with unsterilized blades, and the long-term consequences include chronic pain, infections, childbirth complications, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In Egypt, a 2025 television drama that depicted this practice was pulled from the air after three episodes because religious conservatives protested that the show shamed Egyptian culture.

Why does gender-based injustice persist with such ferocity? Because patriarchy is not a collection of individual bad actors. It is a system, and systems protect themselves. Police officers who mock domestic violence victims are not rogue employees. They are products of training that treats family disputes as private matters. Journalists who misidentify trans murder victims are not malicious. They are working within style guides that have not been updated in decades. Judges who ask rape survivors what they were wearing are not anomalies. They are applying evidentiary standards written by men in the nineteenth century. Giving voice to the unheard in gender and sexuality means refusing these frames. It means naming the perpetrator: not domestic violence but male violence against women. It means respecting identity. It means seeing the system: not poor choices but economic strangulation. The survivors are not asking for pity. They are asking for the world to stop looking away.

> “
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04

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

By Muhammad Awais

Advocate High Court Lahore, Shan Law Association

Every complaint filed, every expert report commissioned, every deposition taken is a small act of resistance against a system that has made some places worth protecting and others worth sacrificing.

The law promises equality, but the earth beneath our feet tells a different story. Toxic waste dumps, polluting factories, and hazardous mines are not distributed randomly across the landscape. They are overwhelmingly located in poor neighborhoods, Indigenous reservations, and communities of color. This is not an accident of geography. It is a product of decades of legal decisions, zoning ordinances, permit approvals, and court rulings that have systematically privileged corporate property rights over human lives. Environmental justice is not merely an ethical or scientific question. It is a constitutional, statutory, and common law failure. Lawyers who practice in this field know that the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and their counterparts in dozens of countries contain powerful language about protecting all people, yet enforcement has been so skewed that a child growing up in a Black neighborhood in Louisianas Cancer Alley has a 95% higher lifetime cancer risk than a child living twenty miles away in a white suburb. The law is not neutral. It has been weaponized to make some communities sacrificial zones.

The landmark study that launched the modern environmental justice movement was the 1987 report Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States by the United Church of Christs Commission for Racial Justice. It found that race was the single most significant factor in the

location of hazardous waste facilities, more significant than income, homeownership, or population density. Three decades later, a 2024 follow-up study confirmed that the disparities have worsened. Communities of color are exposed to 38% more polluted air than white communities, and Black Americans die from asthma at three times the rate of white Americans. The legal mechanisms that produce this disparity are intricate but predictable: zoning laws that permit industrial uses only in low-density residential areas, which happen to be where Black and Brown people were redlined into living, variance procedures that favor established businesses over new residents, and environmental impact statements that aggregate risks across large regions so that localized hot spots disappear in the averages.

Consider the case of Flint, Michigan, a legal disaster that should be taught in every civil rights class. In 2014, a state-appointed emergency manager switched the citys water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River to save money. The river water was not treated with corrosion inhibitors, causing lead to leach from old pipes into the drinking water. For 18 months, government officials denied there was a problem while children developed rashes, hair fell out, and blood lead levels doubled and tripled. A pediatrician named Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha eventually proved the contamination using statistical analysis, but the states response was to attack her credibility. The legal aftermath has been a nightmare of procedural hurdles. The Michigan Court of Appeals dismissed lead poisoning claims against several government officials, holding that they were entitled to qualified immunity. The United States Supreme Court declined to review the case. As of 2025, only one government official has faced criminal charges, and those were reduced to misdemeanors. The families of Flint, most of whom are Black and low-income, have received a settlement that will be divided among tens of thousands of claimants, with most of the money consumed by attorney fees. The lesson for environmental lawyers is brutal: even when the science is undeniable and the harm is catastrophic, the legal systems procedural barriers, immunities, and statutes of limitations often protect the perpetrators more than the victims.

Internationally, environmental justice litigation follows consistent patterns of legal exclusion. In India, the National Green Tribunal was established in 2010 as a specialized court to handle environmental disputes, and it has issued landmark orders. But a 2025 study by the Centre for Policy Research found that 70% of cases are filed by middle-class or wealthy petitioners, while affected poor communities rarely access the tribunal because of lack of legal awareness, inability to pay lawyer fees, and geographic distance. Bhopal itself remains an open wound: 40 years after the disaster that killed at least 15,000 people immediately and injured over 500,000, the toxic waste still sits on the abandoned factory site, contaminating groundwater. Union Carbide has paid less than $500 million in total compensation, less than the companys annual advertising budget.

For Indigenous communities, environmental justice is inextricably linked to land rights, treaty obligations, and the international law principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has issued several landmark decisions, but the enforcement mechanism of the Inter-American system is weak. In Canada, the Supreme Courts 2014 decision in Tsilhqotin Nation v. British Columbia recognized Aboriginal title to a large tract of land and required the province to obtain Indigenous consent before logging. But subsequent litigation revealed that consent is a moving target. A 2025 report by the Canadian Bar Association found that Indigenous communities spend an average of $3.2 million per major environmental case, while mining and logging companies spend ten times that amount.

Climate displacement is the newest frontier of environmental justice law. In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Committee issued a landmark decision establishing the principle that climate change can, in extreme circumstances, trigger non-refoulement obligations under international human rights law. That decision has inspired a wave of climate asylum claims in domestic courts. Lawyers representing climate-displaced communities face a doctrinal crisis: existing refugee law requires persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group. Climate change is none of those. So advocates are developing creative arguments under the social group prong, claiming that Indigenous peoples whose entire culture depends on specific land and water conditions constitute a particular social group.

In Nigeria, the Ogoni people have been fighting Shell Oil Company for decades over oil spills that destroyed their farmland and fisheries. The 2011 UN Environment Programme report found that the contamination in Ogoniland was so severe that full cleanup would take 30 years and cost $1 billion. Environmental justice lawyers have learned to forum-shop, filing cases in jurisdictions with strong human rights protections, but even the most favorable courts cannot force a multinational corporation to pay if its assets are parked in tax havens and its executives are protected by arbitration clauses. The Energy Charter Treaty allows fossil fuel companies to sue governments for billions of dollars if they pass climate policies that reduce the value of their investments.

So where does this leave environmental justice lawyers? The field is simultaneously hopeless and indispensable. Hopeless because the legal architecture was built by the same industrial interests that now exploit it. Indispensable because without lawyers, the communities bearing pollution, climate displacement, and resource extraction have literally no remedy. The most effective strategies are emerging at the intersection of criminal law, civil rights, and international human rights. For the lawyers who represent the unheard communities of Cancer Alley, the Ogoni lands, and the sinking atolls of the Pacific, the work is not about winning. It is about refusing to let the laws promise of equality die quietly. Every complaint filed, every expert report commissioned, every deposition taken is a small act of resistance against a system that has

made some places worth protecting and others worth sacrificing.

> *Every petition filed keeps a community's name alive in the record of justice.*
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05

MENTAL HEALTH IN SILENCE

By Farwa Shafique

Clinical Psychologist, CEO Psychopedia Healing Hub

Being heard is the first and most powerful medicine in the silence of mental illness. The farmer, the girl, the engineer who calculates dosages are not asking for a cure. They are asking to be heard.

As a clinical psychologist, I have sat across from hundreds of patients who described their suffering in whispers. A farmer in Punjab who could not tell his family that he had stopped sleeping because insomnia was a sign of weakness. A teenage girl in Karachi who carved shapes into her arm but told her mother she fell out of a tree. A software engineer in Bangalore who calculated the precise dosage of sleeping pills required to end his life, then recalculated because he wanted to be certain. These are not isolated cases. They are the invisible architecture of a global mental health crisis that kills nearly 800,000 people by suicide every year, one person every forty seconds, while the rest of the world looks away. The silence around mental illness is not a natural phenomenon. It is a learned response, reinforced by families who fear shame, by communities that equate suffering with sin, by legal systems that treat suicidal behavior as a crime, and by healthcare systems that allocate less than 2% of national budgets to mental health in most low-income countries.

Depression is the most common and most misunderstood mental illness. The World Health Organization estimates that 280 million people worldwide live with depression, yet fewer than half receive any treatment. In low-income countries, that number drops to 10%. A 2025 study published in The Lancet Psychiatry examined 10,000 patient records from India, Nigeria, Brazil,

and Pakistan and found that 73% of patients with clinically significant depression initially complained of physical symptoms, headaches, back pain, digestive issues, chest tightness, because they had no vocabulary for emotional distress. Their cultures had given them no permission to say I am sad without being labeled as crazy or cursed. As a psychologist, I have learned to ask not whether someone feels depressed, but whether their body hurts in a way that doctors cannot explain. That question often opens the floodgates. One patient, a 45-year-old domestic worker in Mumbai, had seen fourteen physicians over eight years for chronic fatigue and body aches. She had undergone two endoscopies, three MRIs, and countless blood tests, all normal. Not one doctor had asked her about her mood, her sleep, her thoughts about death. In our third session, she finally said that her employers husband touches her when no one is looking, that she had told no one, and that she cannot sleep because she is planning how to avoid him tomorrow. Her depression was not the problem. It was the symptom of a trauma she had been silenced into carrying alone.

The neurobiology of depression is now well understood. Chronic stress elevates cortisol, which damages the hippocampus, the brain region responsible for memory and emotion regulation. Functional MRI studies show that depressed patients have reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex and increased activity in the amygdala. But knowing the brain circuits does not help a patient who lives in a community where mental illness is attributed to spirit possession or moral failure. In Ethiopia, a 2024 ethnographic study found that the most common explanatory model for depression was fits of the evil eye, and traditional healers were consulted before any medical professional. In Pakistan, where I have trained local health workers, the most common term for depression is gham, which implies a reactive sadness rather than a clinical disorder. The distinction matters because if depression is gham, the treatment is patience and prayer, not antidepressants or therapy. The result is that Pakistan has an estimated 10,000 psychiatrists for a population of 240 million, one psychiatrist for every 24,000 people, compared to one per 1,500 in Germany.

Trauma is a different beast entirely. The diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder requires exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, followed by intrusive symptoms, avoidance of reminders, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and marked changes in arousal and reactivity. But the diagnosis itself is a Western construct. In refugee populations from Syria, Myanmar, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the symptoms of trauma are often expressed as somatic complaints, as spiritual distress, or as social withdrawal that is normalized as the way people are after what happened. A 2025 study of Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshs Coxs Bazar camp found that 87% of adults met diagnostic criteria for PTSD, but only 6% would accept a mental health diagnosis because of the stigma attached. The researchers trained local community health workers to use the term thinking too much instead of PTSD, and acceptance rates rose to 52%. Language is the first intervention.

The long-term effects of childhood trauma are perhaps the most devastating and the most silenced. The Adverse Childhood Experiences study found that childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction are remarkably common and have a cumulative effect on adult health. A person with an ACE score of 4 or higher is twice as likely to develop heart disease, four times as likely to have depression, and twelve times as likely to attempt suicide. A 2024 meta-analysis of 45 studies from South Asia found that 56% of children reported physical abuse, 42% reported emotional abuse, and 28% reported sexual abuse. The perpetrators were overwhelmingly family members or trusted adults. These children grow up to become adults who cannot trust, cannot regulate their emotions, cannot sustain relationships, and cannot understand why they feel so different from everyone else. They are the patients who come to my clinic after three failed marriages, or after a second drunk driving arrest, or after their children have been taken by social services. They say they do not know why they are like this. And I have to tell them that their brains were shaped by violence before they had the words to describe it.

Suicide is the final, irreversible silence. The World Health Organization reports that 800,000 people die by suicide every year, but this is certainly an undercount because many countries criminalize suicide or classify deaths as accidents to spare families the stigma. In India, a colonial-era law remains on the books that criminalizes attempted suicide. The consequence is that a person who survives a suicide attempt is handcuffed to a hospital bed, interrogated by police, and threatened with prosecution, a response that guarantees they will never seek help again. In Sri Lanka, where pesticide ingestion was the most common method, the government restricted the sale of the most toxic pesticides in the 1990s, and suicide rates fell by 70% over two decades. The silence around suicide is not just a failure of mental health systems. It is a failure of community.

The role of stigma in maintaining this silence cannot be overstated. A 2025 cross-national study measured stigma across 30 countries and found that the highest levels of public stigma were in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where over 80% of respondents agreed that people with mental illness are dangerous. The lowest levels of stigma were in the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Canada, where public education campaigns have been running for decades. What breaks the silence? In my clinical experience, three things. First, permission: when a patient hears that many people in their situation have thoughts of suicide and that it is not a sign of weakness but a sign of severe pain, that permission alone often reduces the urgency of the suicidal impulse. Second, language: using the patients own words for their suffering, not imposing clinical jargon. Third, action: mental health treatment works. Cognitive behavioral therapy, antidepressants, and low-intensity community interventions all have strong evidence bases. The problem is not that we do not know what works. The problem is that we do not deliver it. In most low-income countries, the annual mental health budget is less than $2 per

person. The silence is political as much as personal. And in that silence, being heard remains the first and most powerful medicine.

> *Being heard is the first and most powerful medicine in the silence of mental illness.*
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POLITICAL PRISONERS

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My job is not to win, because winning in these systems is rare. My job is to document, to file petitions that will be ignored, to keep the client's name alive so that one day the file is there.

I have represented clients in police stations, military courts, and secret detention centers. In every case, the pattern is the same: an arrest without a warrant, detention without charge, and a legal system that moves at a glacial pace while the accused rots in a cell. Amnesty International estimates that over 1.5 million people are held as political prisoners worldwide, but the true number is unknowable because many are never registered in any official system. As a lawyer, the first thing I do is demand a writ of habeas corpus, produce the body, but in too many regimes, the government simply denies that the person exists.

The legal framework protecting detainees is clear on paper. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by 173 countries, guarantees the right to be informed of charges, to be brought promptly before a judge, and to challenge the lawfulness of detention. But promptly has been interpreted by courts as anything from 48 hours to 90 days. In Egypt, pretrial detention can last two years under emergency laws. In India, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act allows detention for 180 days without charge. In China, reeducation through labor was formally abolished but has been replaced by detention for education with no judicial oversight. I have filed hundreds of bail applications, but when the charge is sedition or terrorism, loosely defined in most penal codes, bail is routinely denied.

Torture is the other weapon of political detention. The UN Convention Against Torture defines torture as any act inflicting severe pain for purposes such as obtaining information or intimidating a person. Yet the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture reports that 80% of countries still practice torture, despite legal prohibition. As a lawyer, I have submitted medical reports documenting burn marks, broken bones, and electrical scars. Prosecutors routinely dismiss them as self-inflicted. The legal doctrine that excludes evidence obtained through torture is ignored in most national courts. In Turkey, after the 2016 coup attempt, over 150,000 detainees reported torture, yet not one security official has been convicted.

The most vulnerable are those held in secret detention centers, locations where the International Committee of the Red Cross is denied access. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that secret detention violates the right to liberty, but the judgment has no enforcement mechanism. As a lawyer, my job in these cases is not to win, because winning is rare. My job is to document, to file petitions that will be ignored, to visit jails where visits are refused, and to keep the clients name alive so that one day, when the political winds shift, the file is there. I have watched governments change and political prisoners released, not because the law worked, but because the political calculation changed. The law in those moments served only as a record, a proof that someone cared enough to keep asking.

What does justice look like for political detainees? It rarely looks like a courtroom victory. More often it looks like a family that finally receives confirmation their father is alive. It looks like a medical report that a judge cannot ignore. It looks like a habeas corpus petition that forces a government to at least acknowledge the person exists. In 2024 alone, I filed 23 such petitions. Twelve were dismissed. Six remain pending. Five resulted in the clients release or transfer to a formal facility where family visits were permitted. Those five people went home to their families. That is what justice looks like in a broken system. It is incomplete, painfully slow, and maddening in its inconsistency. But it is real. The law is a promise, and for political prisoners, that promise is almost always broken. But as long as lawyers are willing to make the argument, the promise has not been entirely abandoned.

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